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REWARDS OF FRIENDSHIP

By Laurie Mawlam

Friendship is a truly wonderful thing: a unique blend of affection, loyalty, love, respect, trust, and loads of fun. Isn't this something we all strive for? Sadly, children with autism are either unable to or struggle to develop these deep, meaningful relationships, especially with their peers. This magnificent story is about six very special eighth-grade boys, one of whom is diagnosed with autism. The relationship these boys share is the essence of true friendship and is an example to everyone.

Samuel Raffoul was diagnosed with autism when he was 2 years old. He didn't reach developmental milestones like other children. His limited language had disappeared and his connections with others grew more and more challenged. Despite these differences, when the time came to enroll their son in senior kindergarten, his parents would forge ahead and choose a local Catholic School for him to attend. Sam, as his friends call him, was assigned Laurie Cook as his educational assistant (EA). She would stay with him throughout his elementary and middle school years and have a huge influence on his success at school.

In reflecting over the years, Cook's infinitely positive outlook, along with her nonjudgmental and compassionate way with Sam, clearly had an impact on him

and his fellow students. Five of Sam's classmates, all athletic and considered the "cool kids," were different from the rest, just like Sam was different in his special way.

Often "cool kids" are blessed with the status that allows them to bypass the efforts required to fit in, but this group went against the grain and actually spent an extraordinary amount of free time and energy trying to fit into Sam's world. They used imaginative methods that the young often create due to their less complex view of the world. They learned to see him in a reality beyond the barriers that the



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symptoms of autism can erect. This effort had a resoundingly positive outcome on Sam, his family, and the greater community.

“Many of us were curious about what autism was and how Sam related towards things in life,” Peter says. Sam’s friends would question why he flicked his fingers and got overwhelmed with certain situations. Cook would wisely explain that Sam did these things to look after himself, just like we might choose other habits.

With an increasing knowledge of autism, the boys became more and more comfortable with Sam. They began to view him through a different lens, which spurred them to see his mannerisms as part of who he was. They even began experimenting by trying out some of his different gestures. They explained the reason behind joining Sam was to try to comprehend the sensations Sam was feeling as he performed them. This led to interesting discussions among themselves and more and more questions about autism and Sam. Christina, Sam’s mom, was often called upon to explain Sam’s autism to this knowledge-hungry group of young men. Over time, they concluded that Sam wasn’t all that different from other kids, and they were determined to let everyone in on this newfound knowledge.

“Sam just had a harder time reacting towards things in life,” Steven says. Cook encouraged the boys to continue to get to know him and understand him better. And they did just that. They learned to decipher the clues that showed he was interested in their friendship, even though Sam may have appeared to show the exact opposite. They learned to recognize the little signs that revealed his excitement to be with them and how much they meant to him.

Peter, Bakous, Steven, Ahmad, Johnny, and Sam all share similar interests and mutual respect. This special bond between all six boys is incredibly touching and inspiring.

When asked to share some of their fun times, their faces light up with genuine excitement. Bakous eagerly speaks up, volunteering to go first. Unable to suppress the giggles before he gets a word out, he shares: “When Mrs. Cook is away and Sam has a substitute EA, he is so funny. He will test the new EA and do things like motion that he needs them to tie his shoes when



Sam’s family (Christina, George, Sam, and younger brother Nicholas)

he totally knows how to tie his own shoes. It’s his way of being silly.”

Examples keep pouring out. Ahmad recalls, “I remember the first time we went to the greenhouse at Sam’s house. It was an awesome experience! We got to see an entirely different side of Sam. He wasn’t shy at all. He acted just like one of us, to the point none of us realized that we were with a boy who had autism.”

Johnny adds, “Swimming in Sam’s pool was also an awesome experience! We couldn’t believe how fast Sam could swim! He could swim faster than Steven and he has had a pool since he was born!”

While Sam’s parents were hesitant at first to invite the boys into their son’s life, the hesitation was short lived. Inviting a single child to one’s home when uncertain of the outcome is one thing; having five over was understandably daunting.

It was apparent to all very quickly that an extraordinary, authentic camaraderie had developed between the boys. Today, Sam’s parents attribute it to two things: the continuous encouragement from Cook to nurture a friendship with Sam over all the years and the boys’ open-minded, accepting personalities that allowed Sam to enter their lives. The boys’ solid Christian and family beliefs were the foundation to

opening their hearts.

This was the beginning and would continue to be a win-win relationship for everyone involved. The gains for the Raffoul’s were undeniable, but this group of young men benefited from an experience that also allowed them to shed any inhibitions they carried. Society’s youths often receive messages that restrict them from showing their enthusiasm for simple pleasures, but with Sam they could reveal their true selves and just enjoy the simplicity of being young.

Peter speaks up next with a grin from ear to ear to share a story of his own. Peter recalls the satisfaction of being a player in teaching Sam how to ride his bike. “It was in grade seven and Sam still had training

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wheels on his bike. Christina, his mom, told us they had been trying to teach him how to ride it for years." The boys suggested that Sam needed a bigger bike. They believed he could do it because they could; it was all in how they viewed Sam.

All the boys encouraged by telling Sam, "Just watch us and try what we do and you will get it. Don't be afraid, you won't fall." Sam was apprehensive at first, but by the end of the first day he got the riding and steering part down – though he was still dragging his feet to stop. By day two he showed more confidence and was using the hand brakes a lot more. By the end of the week he had mastered riding his bike. Peter proudly remembers that bike ride Sam made along with his friends around the block with no adults. "We knew he could do it and he would like it once he got it," Ahmad adds.

One of the highlights for all the children in grade eight was the end-of-year class trip. It was something everyone looked forward to and dreamed about. This was their year, and the class had planned a camping trip to the Muskokas north of Toronto, which was hours away from their town of Leamington in Southwestern Ontario. All five boys recalled how upsetting it was thinking about the possibility of Sam not going. It would be a big step for Sam to be away from home, hours away, in an environment he wasn't familiar with. But the boys had a plan.

Months before the trip, they started telling Sam everything about it. Peter recalls how they would all get excited when telling Sam about the long bus ride, sleeping in the cabins, and doing all the fun things that come with a camping trip. At the same time, they started working on Sam's parents to gain their approval for the trip.

Bakous recalls, "We could tell Sam's parents were a little nervous about it, but we knew he could do it and he would have fun if he could go." The thought of leaving one of their best friends behind was unbearable.

While the boys continued to talk about the camping trip regularly, a practice sleepover was planned in the basement of Sam's grandparents' house a few weeks ahead of the trip. This would be the test run before they got hours away from their hometown in a new environment. The boys recall that night with grim looks. Sam was upset that night and you could tell he really wanted to go home. His parents' house was only 10 minutes down the road.

Steven wisely shares, "We let him have his space to work through it and kept telling him it was OK and that if he could stay we would have fun." While the evening wasn't easy, Sam did face and overcome the challenge of having his first solo overnight away from home, and the boys got what they wanted. Sam would be joining them on their highly anticipated eighth-grade camping trip.

Busting at the seams, the boys go on to describe one of the highlights of the trip: their canoe ride. Sam wasn't eager to try canoeing. Cook jokingly offered Sam a cinnamon bun if he went for a canoe ride with his friends. Sam shook his head "no." Cook raised the ante to two cinnamon buns. Again, Sam shook his head "no." Cook finally gave in and asked what it was going to take. A smirking Sam replied, "Four cinnamon buns." Cook relented, thinking what a ham Sam was!

With Sam ready to participate in his first canoe ride, all the boys put on their life jackets. Peter, Bakous, and Johnny set out in their canoe first, coaxing the others to follow them. On shore, Steven took the front of the second canoe and Ahmad the back, leaving the middle spot for Sam. Ahmad recalls the anxiety on Sam's face.

"You could tell he really didn't want to do it, but he was going to try." Sam's anxiety quickly turned into outward bursts of laughter as his canoeing partners' oars lightly splashed Sam with every stroke. "He was really excited," Bakous says. "You could hear him laughing really loud."

Steven continues in disbelief: "We got

out into the middle of the lake and Sam stood up in the canoe and started jumping and waving his arms. He was laughing really hard. I was afraid the canoe was going to tip!"

While the boys never knew for sure what Sam intended by carrying on in the canoe, they suspect he was either really excited or just wanted to have fun by scaring them a bit, which he succeeded in doing. The trip was marvelous for everyone, and memories like this will stay with them forever.

This past June all the boys graduated from eighth grade. Sam attended the graduation mass and awards ceremony with his friends by his side. When the awards continued to drag on, Sam tapped Peter on the shoulder and said, "I want Portuguese Club." Peter calmly told Sam he was doing great and it was almost over. Sam was ready for the next part of the evening to be held at the Portuguese Club – supper, more presentations, and a dance.

"Everyone had their families at the Portuguese Club," Peter recalls. "But Sam had the most. He had 21 people there for him."

Bakous interrupts, "You've got to hear this. At the presentations everyone had a baby picture with no name. Once the baby picture appeared, the student's graduation picture with their name would follow. Everyone clapped at every picture, but when Sam's picture came up everyone was screaming 'Sam!' and he got the loudest applause. It was great." Sam sat there, surrounded by his family and friends, taking it all in.

"He knew he was important," Peter adds.

Sam was proud, but these boys were perhaps even prouder to call themselves Sam's friends.

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1. Sam wearing Muskoka Woods T-shirt
2. Grade 8 graduation (L to R - Peter, Bakous, Sam, Johnny, Steve, Ahmad)
3. Sam at graduation with Mrs. Cook, his Educational Assistant
4. Sam's canoe ride (Steve at front, Sam in middle, Ahmad at back)
5. Sam riding bike on grade 8 trip to Muskoka Woods



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"Sam doesn't care if his clothes are dirty or what he looks like," Johnny explains. "He teaches all of us that possessions are not important. Sam always has a smile on his face and always has something interesting to do."

In many ways, Sam is a role model for everyone. Steven sums it all up, speaking with maturity beyond his 13 years: "Sam is a normal kid. Autism is just part of who he is."

Recently, Peter, Bakous, Steven, Ahmad, and Johnny spoke to Sam's brother Nicholas' class about their rewarding relationship with Sam. They want to inspire another generation to nurture a special friendship with Sam's brother. Nicholas was also diagnosed with autism. In their presentation to the class, the boys shared their wonderful experiences together and explained how special it was to have Sam in their lives. They really wanted to encourage others to be able to have the same experience they had. The boys were also honest and talked about many of the things that went wrong, but they offered strategies from years of experience on how to overcome any obstacles. Their

presentation touched all who attended, and a group of boys have now reached out to befriend Nicholas.

Sam's parents wish they could express the blessing that this relationship has been for their family, but words to truly convey this have yet to be created.

"More than teachers, programs, and special classes, these friends have shown my son the unique joy there is in life when you have friends," Christina shares, "Friends who express their pride in his accomplishments, no matter how small, who show understanding, as they know how hard he works to gain what he has achieved. They show compassion when he is upset when others may distance themselves from him because he is unable to communicate his feelings in ways that are familiar. The boys never give up on him when it is hard, but try again and again. This exceptional group of young men have been more than good friends to Sam; they have been role models, brothers, and guardian angels."

The boys' simple acceptance of Sam has enriched his life beyond measure, but being like them (a good friend) Sam has returned the favor.

It is my hope that this story will have

an impact similar to that of the boys' presentation. I hope it will touch the hearts of other children and inspire them to reach out and befriend a child with autism. While befriending a child with autism may require students to step out of their comfort zones initially, it is important to remember how often we ask children with autism to step out of theirs. The rewards are great, and I know five young boys whose lives will be richer and more complete forever more because they did such a thing.